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KOREAN UNIFICATION AND U.S.-ROK COOPERATION

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The political landscape of Northeast Asia has undergone immense change over the past year. All six members of the six-party talks have witnessed leadership transitions since December 2011. These transitions offer the international community a tremendous opportunity to review, recalibrate, and renew their collective efforts to achieve stability on the Korean Peninsula, with the ultimate goal being the peaceful unification of the two Koreas.

The continued division of the Korean Peninsula is far more than one of the only lasting relics of World War II and the Cold War; it is a persistent humanitarian disaster. The people of North Korea live in a state of deprivation and oppression, as if locked in a perpetual nightmare from another era. North Korea is also the most likely source for conflict and nuclear proliferation in the Asia-Pacific—a status made doubly troubling given the region’s profound importance to global peace and prosperity.

The unification of the Korean Peninsula stands to potentially put an end to these tensions. Yet achieving unification represents a profoundly vexing question, as it could open a Pandora’s box of uncertainties and plausible scenarios, each more disruptive and destructive than the last. The status of North Korea’s nascent nuclear weapons program, the potential for U.S. and Chinese military forces to operate in very close proximity, and the practical need to secure, govern, integrate, and develop the North after decades of deprivation and isolation are some of the many challenges unification may pose.

Unification has eluded the Korean Peninsula for 60 years. It thus might be natural for analysts to write off the potential for Korean unification in the future: if it hasn’t happened already, especially given the weakness and fragility of the regime in Pyongyang, why should unification be seriously considered at this time? Yet the inherently unpredictable nature of foreign affairs, as well as the serious consequences of unification for the entire Asia-Pacific, means that unification should never be far from the considerations of strategists and policymakers.

The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) and the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) jointly convened a high-level conference to discuss the implications of Korean unification for the U.S.-ROK alliance and the greater Asia-Pacific region. The conference was held in Seattle on November 27, 2012, and sponsored by the South Korean Ministry of Unification under the auspices of the Korea Global Forum initiative.

The discussion involved experts from South Korea and the United States and touched on a wide range of issues, including policy toward North Korea following the U.S. and ROK presidential elections, the current political and economic situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the impact of strategic rebalancing on the Korean Peninsula, the implications of Korean unification, and strategies to prepare for and promote unification.

Following is a summary of the issues discussed between the U.S. and South Korean experts. The views expressed herein are not necessarily those of KINU or NBR, the authors of this report, or the conference participants.

Current Dynamics Inside North Korea

North Korea remains as shrouded in mystery as ever. While Pyongyang is still clearly consumed with solidifying Kim Jong-un's grip on power, it is unclear if Kim's current approach to economic and security affairs will be sustained over the long term. So far, his behavior indicates that missile tests are still seen by Pyongyang as effective domestic and foreign policy tools. Kim's views on the purpose of nuclear weapons for North Korean security remain unknown, and it is therefore unclear if he will follow through on the regime's previous commitments regarding nuclear disarmament.

Since his father's death in December 2011, Kim Jong-un has sought to solidify the loyalties of North Korea's elites and strengthen security mechanisms. To these ends, he has successfully obtained the status of the head of the military, initiated a series of purges that removed some perceived adversaries and strengthened his power over the bureaucratic mechanisms of the regime, and differentiated himself from his father by emphasizing his personal charisma and seeming approachability. Kim continues to court the military and other political elites and is focused on enhancing trade with China.

Still, challenges remain. Although Kim has shown himself to be a charismatic leader, he has not dealt with the economy or the intricacies of the power structure. The economy remains a particular problem. Kim seems to be focused on enhancing North Korea's economy—or at least Pyongyang's—in part to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the country's elites.

There are indications that the North Korean government has allowed a degree of market activity to emerge. This has in recent months generated something of a market and construction boom in Pyongyang, and the quality of life for its people appears to be improving. Some believe that this indicates a broader interest in economic reform along the lines of China under Deng Xiaoping. Others disagree, pointing to anecdotal reports, such as those indicating that university students are being used as free construction labor, that suggest that recent activities may represent a

nascent level of reform at best. Additionally, these reforms (limited though they may be) have been restricted to Pyongyang itself; some rural areas in fact appear to have experienced a small-scale famine. Despite some marketization, economic inefficiencies remain enormous, and the level of corruption in North Korea is staggering. The likely result will be continued economic malaise, potentially increased factionalism among the elite, and further separation of social classes.¹

Further, it is uncertain how market forces are allowed to operate in Pyongyang. Are entrepreneurs and investors allowed to keep their profits, or are these siphoned to the coffers of government and military elites? Are people allowed a degree of economic autonomy, or are their choices scripted by government mandate and graft? Indications of true economic reform remain unclear.

When considering North Korea's internal situation, China's role should not be underestimated. China is the DPRK's most important trading partner and complicates the international community's ability to hold Pyongyang responsible for its actions. As a result, North Korea today is more dependent on China than ever. Yet outside observers should not misconstrue influence with dominance. Pyongyang continues to demonstrate a willingness to buck Beijing's advice, despite their close economic ties.

Strategic Implications of Korean Unification

Despite its present difficulties, there are few indications that the DPRK will collapse in the near future. Nevertheless, the persistent potential for unification by collapse, confederation, or conflict—as well as the tremendous strategic implications of unification—means that it should not be disregarded by strategists, planners, or policymakers.

The manner in which unification is achieved will undoubtedly have tremendous impact on the strategic implications of a unified Korean Peninsula. Indeed, the nature of North Korea's ultimate landing, either hard or soft, and the extent to which external actors might be compelled by their own strategic interests to intervene in a collapse scenario will fundamentally shape the post-unification strategic environment in and around the peninsula. However, such scenario-specific analyses were beyond the scope of this conference. Discussions instead centered on the challenges immediately following Korean unification and how unification could affect the broader strategic environment of Northeast Asia.

¹ For more information on the “songbun” system, see Robert Collins, “Marked for Life: Songbun—North Korea's Social Classification System,” U.S. Committee on Human Rights in North Korea, http://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_Songbun_Web.pdf.

Even under the most felicitous circumstances, the unification of the Korean Peninsula will be an extremely daunting and expensive undertaking. Rebuilding and reintegrating North Korea, even in relatively benign circumstances, will be the largest and most complex humanitarian relief effort ever undertaken, and as such will require the focused and concerted efforts of the entire international community over a prolonged period of time.

The groundbreaking research conducted by social psychologist Phillip Tetlock demonstrates the unreliability of prediction, even by experts.² His findings explain why the vast majority of international experts routinely fail to anticipate major events, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of apartheid in South Africa, or the Arab Spring. Even though these issues were studied closely for decades, the timing and means by which they eventually took place were largely unexpected.

It is therefore reasonable to believe that Korean unification will occur at a time and in a manner that is unexpected. Although the United States remains greatly committed to South Korea, it will not be willing to risk war to reunify the Korean Peninsula by force. Yet if the peninsula is deemed to be moving indelibly toward unification, the United States would encourage this process and help bring it to a quick and relatively painless resolution. This means that the U.S. approach to unification is largely reactive and will have little ability to influence facts on the ground until Pyongyang's demise, for whatever reason, seems inevitable.

Given this unpredictability, South Korea and the United States should be highly flexible and prepared to quickly adapt to emerging situations. In the immediate aftermath of unification, the most pressing tasks facing the allies will be defeating the remnants of the Korean People's Army (KPA) and any insurgencies they may attempt to conduct, securing WMD facilities and other arms depots and caches, providing basic social services, and establishing legitimate governance of the North. In the medium term, Seoul will need to develop the North's infrastructure, educate and employ the North Korean populace, conduct truth and reconciliation activities to account for past human rights violations and facilitate the reintegration of the Korean people, and rebuild an economy long dilapidated by misguided economic policies. Indeed, the sheer scale and scope of these operations would dwarf anything similar ever attempted.

The immediate challenges posed by unification would most likely result in the tightening of the U.S.-ROK alliance. In the early days of unification, the United States would certainly play a significant role in supporting the ROK's efforts to stabilize and rebuild the North. In the following months, the United States would be ideally situated to provide the ROK with material, financial, and logistical support throughout the reconstruction process. Additionally, the most

² Philip E. Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

important role the United States might play following unification would be to provide a benign external security environment that would enable Seoul to focus on the monumental tasks of unification, reintegration, and reconstruction. Assuming that unification is successful and results in a liberal, market-oriented, and democratic state, a unified Korea could emerge as a major regional player with an enhanced basis of national power.

In the long term, however, once unification has been placed on a successful footing, the *raison d'être* of the U.S.-ROK alliance will necessarily need to be revisited. There appears to be concern among some American interlocutors that a reunified Korea would attempt to balance its relations with China and the United States, and might even terminate the U.S.-ROK security alliance, thereby upending the regional security architecture. Yet most Americans also believe that the alliance will remain viable and necessary even long after unification, given other persistent and emerging regional security challenges and Seoul's likely long-term focus on domestic issues. Indeed, the continuation of the alliance makes good geopolitical sense given Korea's strategic neighborhood and the challenges the country would likely face post-unification.

Regional perspectives and responses to unification would reflect the varying interests of Korea's neighboring states. Although Japan would likely welcome unification and would be an important source of material, economic, and logistical assistance, it may also be somewhat wary of the potential power of a reunified Korea. Japan would likely seek to build positive relations with a reunified Korea through robust economic and political engagement, a process that might be greatly facilitated by the United States within the context of its alliance network in Asia.

When considering the potential for the unification of the Korean Peninsula, any analysis must reflect the interests, likely policies, and dynamics between the Asia-Pacific's two greatest powers: the United States and China. Based on current trends, three broad potential outcomes can be identified.

1. The first scenario is one in which China retains its strong statist characteristics, continues to consider the status quo on the Korean Peninsula as strategically viable, maintains its special relationship with the DPRK, and develops the ability to match U.S. military power in Northeast Asia. This scenario would likely result in the perpetuation of the status quo, as it is highly unlikely that the United States or ROK would be willing to precipitate unification, even though the partitioning of the peninsula would continue to be deplorable.
2. The second scenario involves China successfully developing and deploying a system of robust anti-access/area-denial capabilities, thus creating a zone of exclusion within the first island chain and potentially beyond. Consequently, the United States may lose credibility in the region because its ability to maintain alliance commitments would come

into question. South Korea, no longer able to rely on U.S. protection, may swing into China's orbit, as the region becomes bifurcated with the United States and Japan on one side and China and the Korean Peninsula on the other in competing spheres of influence. Under this scenario, unification might occur, but it would be on Chinese rather than Korean terms.

3. In a third scenario, the successful unification of the Korean Peninsula depends primarily on domestic transformation within China. Beijing finds itself currently occupied with tremendous internal challenges—a slowing economy, growing income inequality, demographic pressures, corruption, and environmental degradation—that will require reform of its political, economic, and legal structures. A more liberalized China would be much more likely to see Korean unification as a desirable goal. In this scenario, unification occurs through a gradual and cautious process directed at avoiding a complete North Korean collapse. Although the process would be slow and deliberate, this scenario represents the most favorable outcome.

Currently, however, China seems to be generally content with the status quo and the maintenance of North Korea as a buffer state against South Korea and its U.S. ally. While Beijing has demonstrated increasing exasperation with Pyongyang's continued bellicosity, China's chief concern is in maintaining a stable regional environment to facilitate its own continued economic development. A North Korean collapse, under any scenario, would seriously undermine this central dictum. Moreover, a reunified Korean Peninsula would present China with several significant challenges. With its North Korean buffer gone, Beijing would be highly sensitive to the presence of a U.S. ally along the Yalu and Tumen river borders, which Beijing fears may enable the presence of a potentially hostile military and help spread liberal democratic values into China itself. Furthermore, the large flows of North Korean refugees that would likely cross into northeastern China could lead to widespread destabilization and greatly diminish China's prospects for sustaining economic growth—an outcome the Chinese leadership would likely find intolerable.

In an effort to avoid these outcomes, it is entirely possible that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) might be dispatched into the DPRK upon its collapse in an effort to stabilize the situation, establish a buffer to prevent the incursion of refugees or foreign military forces into Chinese territory, secure WMDs, or even forestall an intervention by the ROK. The danger inherent in such a scenario is immense, given that uncoordinated incursions into North Korea—by the PLA from the north, and ROK and U.S. forces from the south—could lead to misunderstandings and conflict with tremendous potential for escalation.

Russia will also have a potentially important role to play in Korean unification. Moscow's interests in a unified Korea would predominantly lie in Korea's potential to provide a market for

Russian energy, as well as greater port access. As such, Russian involvement could be helpful in rebuilding the energy infrastructure in the North. In a more strategic sense, Moscow has an interest in ensuring that a unified Korea does not lean too heavily toward China or the United States, yet will likely prove unable to significantly influence power dynamics on the Korean Peninsula.

All the great powers of Northeast Asia—China, Japan, the ROK, Russia, and the United States—have significant interests and potential roles to play in Korean unification. This issue should therefore be the subject of bilateral and multilateral discussions, dialogues, and (as appropriate) planning. Yet most U.S. experts agree that for moral and pragmatic reasons South Korea must continue to lead on all elements of unification.

U.S.-ROK Cooperation after the 2012 Elections

The close cooperation and coordination between South Korea and the United States on North Korea policy will continue to be the central pillar of the alliance relationship. Following a period of drift during the Roh administration, new life was breathed into the U.S.-ROK security alliance, owing in no small part to the close personal relationship that developed between Presidents Obama and Lee. With Obama's re-election to a second term as president of the United States and the recent election of Park Geun-hye as president of South Korea, it appears that the alliance relationship will largely continue on a positive footing.

However, that is not to say that there will be no change in South Korea's policy toward the North following Park Geun-hye's inauguration. Indeed, while she hewed to a more conservative line on North Korea than her opponent in the presidential election, Park has not fully endorsed President Lee's policy of "strategic patience." She has argued that relying on international sanctions and discontinuing dialogue with the North has been insufficient in taming Pyongyang's belligerence. On the campaign trail, Park sought to convey a more moderate tone but still insisted that concessions by the North on its nuclear weapons program will help pave the way for the resumption of large-scale aid and investment from the South. While Park has also highlighted the importance of maintaining strong ties with the United States, her more moderate policies, including her intention to sustain humanitarian assistance programs regardless of the prevailing political dynamic with Pyongyang, may not be completely aligned with current U.S. policy. However, the United States will likely seek to ensure that U.S. and ROK policies are closely coordinated and complementary. Ultimately, for both countries, movement on North Korea policy will depend on Pyongyang's willingness to follow through on its previous commitments, as well as its ability to demonstrate seriousness about returning to substantive discussions and putting aside the belligerence of the recent past.

Unfortunately, at this time there appears to be little hope of restarting the six-party talks that have languished since 2009. Pyongyang's provocative actions over the past three years have generally precluded the possibility of resuming talks, despite the expressed interest and attempts of several members. With full-scale talks unlikely to take place in the near future, engagement with Pyongyang will largely hinge on bilateral efforts. Successful bilateral engagement with North Korea may present an attractive pathway back to the full six-party talks; however, such an outcome is far from certain and highly contingent on Pyongyang's behavior. Indeed, even the initiation of bilateral discussions with either Seoul or Washington will hinge on Pyongyang demonstrating that the negotiations will be serious and bear positive and substantive results. Washington in particular will likely remain highly skeptical of any overtures from the North due to the failure of the "leap day deal" in 2012. Fundamentally, the United States and South Korea must determine whether or not the DPRK will ever countenance abandoning its nuclear program. Until North Korea is willing to abide by its previous commitments to nuclear disarmament, a return to the full six-party talks is difficult to envision.

As a result, U.S. policy toward North Korea is likely to be relatively unchanged during President Obama's second term. Furthermore, while the United States certainly has strong interest in maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and working toward unification, domestic economic priorities will likely continue to consume the lion's share of the administration's attention in the near term. Moreover, while the second Obama administration will have more political freedom to maneuver with no re-election campaign on the horizon, several American scholars believe that the administration is wary of engaging with North Korea, owing in large part to the collapse of the leap day deal. Consequently, the Obama administration is likely to continue on its current course vis-à-vis North Korea.

While the United States is thus unlikely to implement any significant new policy initiatives aimed specifically at the Korean Peninsula, U.S. commitments to maintaining regional stability have received increased attention following Washington's announcement that it would initiate a policy of "strategic rebalancing" to the Asia-Pacific. As the United States implements the rebalance, the process of revitalizing, strengthening, and reimagining alliances will be of paramount importance. Maintaining political consensus between the ROK and United States will be crucial if the alliance is to continue to thrive. To this end, the election of Park Geun-hye bodes well for the ongoing convergence of U.S. and ROK interests.

While the primary mission of the U.S.-ROK alliance will still be focused on deterring North Korean aggression, the United States should encourage the ROK to take on greater responsibility in providing global public goods throughout the international system. To this end, the United States is highly interested in updating the roles and capabilities of its South Korean counterpart and enhancing interoperability. The United States has begun to encourage greater bilateral engagement between South Korea and Japan and, despite the long-standing historical animosities

between the two sides, considers the development of this inter-allied relationship a key component in sustaining stability in Northeast Asia.

Yet as Washington seeks to create a more flexible alliance network in Asia to address the evolving regional security environment, it must be cognizant that the interests of its allies may be more limited than its own. In the case of South Korea, the United States must remain sensitive to ROK interests and capabilities, which remain primarily directed at the domestic security situation vis-à-vis the North. By beginning to expand the scope of the alliance now, the two partners will be better positioned to confront the prevailing security challenges of the region while simultaneously laying the groundwork for a security alliance in a future world where unification has been achieved.

Preparing for Korean Unification

Preparing for unification will be a difficult task. Unification is likely to occur at a time and in a manner that will catch most by surprise. Moreover, as mentioned before, there are a variety of ways through which unification could occur, each carrying its own myriad implications. Consequently, a grand plan—like most military plans—will not survive first contact with reality. Rather, the United States and South Korea should seek to devise a general framework that will enable the implementation of flexible policies that are highly reactive to evolving situations on the ground.

In planning for the eventual unification of the Korean Peninsula, it is important that the United States and South Korea review and implement the lessons learned from other nations who have undergone similar processes. These lessons can be highly instructive when it comes time to craft policies unique to Korea. One case that often goes overlooked, but that offers interesting points for comparison, is the United States' unification experience following the Civil War. There are numerous lessons to be learned from the policies enacted—from both those that proved successful and those that failed—during the reconstruction of the South. Perhaps the greatest and most sobering lesson that may be taken from the U.S. experience is the difficulty and length of time through which unification and reconstruction were achieved. It would certainly be foolish to believe that unification of the Korean Peninsula would be any different in this regard, or indeed any less painful.

As was noted earlier, the immediate tasks following unification will be immense. The most important tasks will be stabilizing a nation likely in a free fall, providing for local-level security, and restoring basic services and infrastructure. The next challenges include the integration of the military, education, economic transition and recovery, the legitimization of the new system of government, and the provision of transitional justice.

The case of counterinsurgency operations in Iraq demonstrates that it is a mistake not to incorporate local knowledge and preexisting institutional capacity in recovery efforts immediately after a regime's fall. To that end, government bureaucracy, particularly at the local levels, must remain intact in order to provide necessary municipal services. While this may make it necessary to prolong the consideration of transitional justice, stability takes precedence at this stage. However, this action must be carefully calibrated, as it runs the risk of undermining legitimacy. The need to ensure security and stability must be balanced with the need to create legitimacy.

Additionally, policies that may be politically expedient but diminish the prospect for long-term structural reform inherently create tension. The pressure to demonstrate to the North Korean people that their lives have changed for the better will be immense. Equally intense will be the pressure to demonstrate to a domestic audience that intervention has been worth the cost. The consequence of these pressures, however, may be *ad hoc* implementation of institutions and services to provide the most benefit the most quickly. Unfortunately, what is expedient is not always what is most effective over the long term. Despite this reality, many people, having grown accustomed to the *ad hoc* system, will be unwilling to lose those benefits or services for the time necessary to implement a permanent solution. The period of transition—from expedient to long-term structural solutions—will be a critical phase in the reconstruction of the North.

Before South Korea begins thinking about developing post-unification policies, however, it must convince others, and indeed its own people, that unification is a worthwhile objective and will benefit all sides. To this end, South Korea must engage in a two-track approach. The first track—focused on domestic audiences in both the North and South—must promote policies aimed at improving inter-Korean dialogue and relations, while simultaneously encouraging greater engagement and activism on the part of South Koreans to counter the public's growing apathy over the issue of unification. The second track—aimed at members of the international community and, most importantly, South Korea's regional neighbors—must break the long-standing perception that the status quo is an acceptable solution. To do so, South Korea will need to reinforce the notion that unification will be of great benefit to the international community in general and to the region in particular. If the South Korean government, in concert with the United States, can persuade those states with the most interest in the peninsula—China, Russia, and Japan—that unification will bring increased stability and prosperity to Northeast Asia, then the allies will be taking a large step toward the ultimate goal of a unified Korea.

Conclusions

The world is undergoing significant change, and a new international order is taking shape in which the Asia-Pacific is preeminent. As strategic balances shift and the world pivots to face the region, the continued division of the Korean Peninsula will have profound geopolitical consequences. Asia has emerged as the economic engine of prosperity, making its stability a matter of global importance. The greatest threat to that stability in recent decades has been a result of the continued division of the Korean Peninsula and the Korean people.

The leadership transitions of all five major Northeast Asian powers over the past year present a remarkable opportunity to objectively reflect on previous efforts to bring peace and stability to the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, they present South Korea and the United States with a brief but clear opportunity to provide leadership in implementing forward-looking policies to build a stable and prosperous order in East Asia.

Although Korean unification may not appear to be on the horizon, it is unwise to underestimate the fluidity of the international system and how rapidly change can occur. Few predicted such events as the collapse of the Soviet Union, September 11, or the Arab Spring; however, such black swan events carry with them significant political and strategic implications. While the DPRK has proven itself to be highly resilient in the past, defying all previous predictions and indications of an imminent collapse, the international community must be prepared for its ultimate downfall.

Responsible nations should engage in frank and substantive planning for coping with the demise of North Korea, whatever course it may take, and in serious planning for the ultimate unification of the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, through positive engagement with key members of the regional community, South Korea and the United States can advance the agenda of unification and generate a broad support base to draw from if presented with the opportunity to achieve this goal.

To that end, the ROK and the United States should increase planning, both internally and bilaterally, for the possibility of Korean unification. The sheer scale of the challenges involved means that these efforts must include all elements of national power, which will need to be coordinated within and between the two societies. Further, the broader international community should begin to discuss the implications of Korean unification. While the issue remains highly sensitive politically, continued avoidance is no longer an acceptable option.

The relationship between the United States and South Korea has been one of the strongest, most enduring, and most important partnerships in the world. Built on shared values and interests, the U.S.-ROK alliance has been a cornerstone of Northeast Asian stability and prosperity for the past

60 years. As the Asia-Pacific grows in strategic importance and the Korean Peninsula looms larger in its importance to regional and global stability, the alliance must prepare for the challenges ahead.

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